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ABSTRACT

Stereotypically masculine men tend to adopt family roles in which they are more important symbolically, as models for power and authority, than realistically, as teachers, care takers and nurturers. For these men, nurturant-expressive involvement with their children is still the exclusive domain of women. Men who have integrated affective behavior, interdependence, and spontaneity into their personal lives are usually older than the adolescent and college age students who are frequent subjects of studies on the male sex role. The sex role standards with which many men evaluate their own behavior undergo a number of changes throughout the adult life span, occurring in response to increasingly significant discrepancies between the behaviors required by their concept of masculinity and the age norms held by others in the culture. These men can resolve this conflict either by continuing to act in accordance with their earlier male standards, or by modifying their conception of male sex role standards and adopting a fathering role within the family. Non-normative events, such as divorce or the death of a spouse, can also lead to an expansion of men's concept of masculinity and an expansion of their involvement with children. It is important for children, as well as men, that fathers not respond to the stress of divorce or the loss of the mother by adopting a more rigid adherence to traditional male sex role standards, but learn to implement a more emergent model. Men will only be able to relate to their children in an emotionally expressive, sensitive and spontaneous manner if they are able to view these behaviors as consistent with their conception of male sex role standards. (JAC)

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NUCLEAR FAMILY BREAK-UP AS AN IMPETUS FOR MALE CHANGE

John R. Moreland, Ph.D.

Although many investigators (Farrell, 1974; Pleck and Sawyer, 1974; Fasteau, 1974; Nichols, 1975; Goldberg, 1976, 1979; and Tolson, 1979) have presented somewhat different conceptualizations of the male sex role, that described by David and Brannon (1975) is as concise and helpful as any. They point out that most men's conceptions of their gender role emphasize achievement and status particularly on the job; dominance and control over other people, including their wives and children; non-emotionality; and success in refraining in activities typically associated with women and described as female, such as child rearing. Men who have internalized these traditional masculinity standards experience self-esteem to the extent that other's and their own evaluation is consistent with their own performance in each of these four areas.

Such men can only define their parenting roles in accordance with Fein's (1978) definition of a tradional father. Fein believes stereotypically masculine men have traditionally adopted family roles in which they are more important symbolically as models for power and authority, than realistically as teachers, care takers and nurturers. He suggests that recently some fathers have also begun to serve as models/teachers and as significant reinforcers for their children's sex-typed behavior, academic and moral development. However, such men still rely on instrumental, rational and logical behaviors in relating to their children. Nurturant-expressive involvement with their children is still the exclusive domain of women.

Fortunately, there are many men who have integrated qualities such as nurturance, emotional awareness and expressiveness, interdependence, and spontaniety into their personal lives. Their relationships with other men, women, and children may be characterized as emotionally sensitive, cooperative and even playful. As I

have argued elsewhere (Moreland, 1979, 1980), these men neither view themselves nor are viewed by others as unmasculine. Rather, these men are usually older than the adolescent and college age students who have most frequently been the subjects in studies on the male sex role.

In order to more fully understand and accurately depict the male experience, one must adopt a developmental perspective. Conceptions of the sex role standards with which men evaluate their own behavior undergo a number of changes throughout the adult life span. These modifications occur in response to increasingly significant discrepancies between the behaviors required by one's conception of masculinity and the age norms held by others in our culture. As men grow older many significant people in their lives begin to expect and require behaviors and qualities which are increasingly discrepant with men's previous conceptions of masculine behavior. As this discrepancy becomes larger, men may begin to experience more and more distress.

One way to resolve this conflict is to continue acting in accordance with earlier male standards. Men who adopt this alternative often appear to be obscene caricatures of adolescents and are often accused of acting very inappropriately. These men also become increasingly dysfunctional, particularly in their family roles, as they become more and more restricted to defining their contribution in their families to that of provider. The other alternative which men face when this discrepancy between age norms and sex-role norms becomes too great is to modify their conception of the male sex role standards. While this process is not without stress, those who successfully do so are able to function much more broadly and effectively in their family roles. They are able to meet both the instrumental and the emotional requirements of parenting. Fein has described these men as adopting an emergent fathering role within their families.

By adopting a developmental perspective, we can more adequately understand both the changes which occur in men's concepts of masculinity as well as the mechanism by which these changes take place. Ironically, the developmental modifications in men's masculinity standards which allow for this more androgenous involvement in parenting are motivated by a desire to more competently respond to age related expectations and norms held by the significant people in their environment.

The process which I have described above is a normative one. I would now like to turn my attention to a similar process often leading to an expansion of men's concepts of masculinity, but which appears to be created or facilitated by non-normative events, rather than normative. What I wish to address are the impacts of divorce and spouse death as causal factors in changing men's conceptions of masculinity and in helping them broaden and expand the nature of their involvement with their children. Most of my observations grow from the clinical work with which I have been involved the past 4-5 years. I have spent a major portion of my time working with men who either are currently going, or have recently gone, through a divorce. In the past several years, I have begun to work increasingly with men whose wives have cancer and are faced with the prospect, if not the actuality, of widowerhood. Let me discuss both of these populations separately.

The Impact of Divorce on Men's Family Involvements

Divorce is a tumultuous time for all members of the family. By definition, every one's life structures are undergoing significant modifications. It takes most families several years to restructure themselves along reasonably stable lines. Whether the decision to divorce is accompanied by feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, anxiety, relief, or excitement, it marks the beginning of a period of introspection and reflection for most men. Irrespective of which partner has initiated the decision to separate and divorce, both adults in the family typically pass through a period in which they attribute the responsibility for their mariage's failure on the other party. However, this blaming process usually gives way gradually to an

increasing focus on one's own contribution to the marriage failure. It is in the examination of their own contribution to the failure of their marriage that many men come to realize for the first time the degree to which their conceptions of masculinity significantly inhibited and restricted their functioning as marital partners and as parents.

There is yet another mechanism by which many men become aware of the degree to which their conceptions of masculinity have significantly restricted the quantity and quality of their relationships with their children. One consequence of the traditional model of fathering is that men are minimally involved in the emotional and nurturant aspects of parenting. In fact, many traditional fathers are only aware of major events and milestones in their children's lives because they are informed of these things by their wives. During the process of divorce, most mothers cease to function as interpreters or mediators between fathers and children. The anxiety that many men experience when they realize that they do not know how to talk with their children often contributes to the accurate observation that divorced or divorcing men have minimal contact with their children. Visitations are often the first time in their lives that many men have exclusive responsibility for their children for any marked period of time. Not only do men frequently become aware of the communication difficulties which exist between them and their children, but they often feel overwhelmed by the rigors of moment to moment supervision and discipline. It is not uncommon for visitation days early in the divorce process to take on a flavor described by Heathington, Cox and Cox (1978) as "everyday is Christmas."

Compared to fathers from intact families, divorced fathers typically make fewer maturity demands, communicate less well, express less affection, are more inconsistent in discipline and have less control over their children when with them (Heatherington et al, 1978). Fathers, apparently responding to the threatened loss of significance in their children's lives, become very permissive and indulgent.

However, non-contingent permissiveness, in conjunction with father's inability to communicate with children, usually gives rise to feelings of anger, resentment and failure as fathers. To escape the unpleasantness of these feelings, many men withdraw from the parenting process altogether. Others tend to define their parenting solely in terms of the traditional parenting guidelines and to limit their fathering to paying a child support payment. Continued acrimonious contact between the ex-spouses usually serves as an important facilitator for one of these two outcomes.

The research assessing the impact of divorce on children has generally shown that a positive post-divorce adjustment is consistently predicted by the following 5 inter-related factors: a) agreement between ex-spouses on child-rearing practices; b) explicit, positive attitudes towards each other by the ex-spouses; c) low conflict between ex-spouses; d) the emotional maturity of the non-custodial parent; and e) the frequency of children's contact with the non-custodial parent, usually the father (Ahrons, 1980; Heatherington, Cox and Cox, 1978; Levitin, 1979; Kulka and Weingarten, 1979; Weiss, 1979; Felner, Farber and Primavera, 1980: Wallerstein and Kelly 1980). Thus from the standpoint of children's post divorce adjustment it is crucial that both parents, including the father, recognize the importance of their continued roles in their children's lives and to cooperate in performing these roles.

It seems important for children, as well as for men, that fathers not respond to the stress of divorce and the difficulties this creates in their relationships with their children by adopting a more rigid adherence to traditional male sex role standards. Both children and men have a lot to gain if divorcing fathers can learn to implement a more emergent model. This usually does not take place unless men are able to examine and modify their conceptions of masculinity. Men will only be able to relate to their children in an emotionally expressive, sensitive and spontaneous manner if they are able to view these behaviors as consistent with their conception of male sex-role standards.

A small but increasing number of divorces occur when the wife walks out the door leaving the husband with the children. Many of these single parent custodial fathers have defined their roles to date in accordance with traditional standards of masculinity and have implemented traditional models of fathering. With their wives' departure, they suddenly are thrust into a position of full responsibility for their childrens' physical, mental and emotional well-being. They quickly have to engage in many behaviors inconsistent with their conception of traditional masculinity. They are faced with either having to stop engagine in these necessary activities or to re-examine and modify their masculinity standards. Because the first choice is not a real alternative, these men are often plunged very quickly into a draining and confusing process of introspection and reflection. The outcome of this process is usually one characterized by a more balanced conception of masculinity which has incorporated emotionally expressive, sensitive, and nurturant aspects with the already existing instrumental qualities.

These men, as is also true of their non-custodial counterparts, are much more able to relate comfortably and satisfyingly to their children. Because these men have expanded and modified their conceptions of masculinity, they are able to more freely and comfortably engage in whatever processes or experiences are required in order to learn the skills which their new parenting roles require of them. I have described elsewhere, a number of psycho-educationally oriented programs which may help men expand their fathering behavior repetoirs (Moreland and Schwebel, 1981).

Widowerhood

During the past 2-2½ years, I have been working increasingly with cancer patients and their families. In approximately half these patients, the identified patient has been the wife in the family. Many of these patients have died, and the recovery process for those who have not is often characterized by long periods of hospitalization. The long-term hospitalization and/or death of a spouse has required the men in these families to assume greater or sole responsibility for an increasing

number of parenting activities as well as the necessary home maintenance roles which their wives formerly performed.

For many of these men, their wife's illness and subsequent death marks the first time in their lives when they have assumed sole responsibility for the emotional needs and well-being of their families. In addition to the pain of slowly watching a loved one die, many of these men have also been confronted with anxiety and internal conflict arising from viewing themselves as performing tasks inconsistent with their masculinity standards. Much of my work with these men has been to help them incorporate stereotypically feminine qualities into their conception of appropriate male sex role standards.

Many of these men have refrained from discusing their wives' approaching deaths with their spouses, because of fears that they would break down and weep or cry. Only by recognizing their need to engage in more and more expressive interactions with their families can men able to expand this particular sex role restriction. Many men experience great difficulty giving physical contact to their sons, yet when faced with the actual or anticipated loss of one's mother, even boys need physical comfort and nurturance from the remaining parent. Before many fathers are comfortable in doing this, they must first modify their conception of masculine behavior.

Even though the protracted illness and death of a spouse may serve as an event requiring men to examine and expand their conception of masculinity, once this occurs, many of them are still very anxious and frightened because they recognize they do not have the skills required to relate to their children in an effective and satisfaying manner. They express considerable frustration and pain at being unable to help their children talk about their feelings of losing their mother. Because they are unfamiliar with their own and others affective lives, many of the men personalize their children's anger and withdrawal. Too often they interpret their children's refusal to talk at a particular point in time as a

demonstration of their ineffectiveness in meeting new responsibilities. It is important to help such men recognize the importance of being physically and emotionally available to their children as opposed to controlling and initiating.

Another aspect of this situation experienced by men whose wives are seriously or terminally ill face is that the illness is often the cause or men examining the nature of their relationship with their spouses. Many men realize for the first time the extent to which they have developed life structures that have significantly limited the quantity and quality of time that they spent with each other. Men may experience considerable regret over the extent to which they have allowed their careers, jobs, and outside interests to detract from the quality and quantity of time they have spent with their wives and families. At this point they often express anger and outrage at the extent to which they feel their masculinity standards have cheated them. For many men their wives' possible or actual deaths serve as the first step in a sequence of events which leads to them becoming much more emotionally and affectively oriented. Even in families where the wives subsequently die, the changes in mens' ability to relate to others is refelcted in the positive changes in their relationships with their children.

For his doctoral dissertation, James Vess is conducting a year long longitudinal study of the effects of long term hospitalization and death on family role reallocation. To date, we have collected both objective measures and structured interview data on fifty time I families. The second of three data collection periods is currently being conducted. As the information is analyzed, I should be able to speak more objectively about the observations above which are currently based on my own clinical observations.

Summary

This paper has argued that there is not one set of masculinity standards against which men measure and evaluate their own behavior. Rather, this paper has

suggested that men examine and modify the male sex role standards upon which they base their sense of masculinity. These standards are changed or modified because of changing competency demands placed upon them by their environment. Normatively, men modify their masculinity standards throughout their lifetime because of changing competency demands and expectations which society holds for men of different ages. However, we have examined two instances, that of divorce and spouse death, in which the competency demands placed upon men require modification of their masculinity standards above and beyond that which may be attributable to age norms.

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